

HARD YAKKA! *

Rosemarie Smart-Alecio

(As many members will be aware, Rosemarie and Alfred were forced to abandon their much-loved 38ft gaff cutter Ironhorse last October, following a succession of catastrophic gear failures while on passage from La Réunion to South Africa. The following article, submitted in August last year but held over from Flying Fish 2015/2 due to lack of space is, of course, printed now with their consent.

As Editor I shall really miss Rosemarie's regular submissions – an amazing 22 over a period of 21 years – during which she was twice awarded the David Wallis Trophy for 'the 'most outstanding, valuable or enjoyable contribution to Flying Fish'.)

Whilst crossing the Indian Ocean, we left Rodrigues to sail directly to La Réunion, approximately 500 miles further west – but reluctantly, because it is a delightful island and we could have stayed another few weeks easily. We urgently needed to ship spares, however – a new Balmar alternator system and a replacement Iridium phone – and had decided to have them sent to La Réunion after being told that Mauritius would not honour the 'yacht in transit'** policy, and would charge us 15% of their value plus a handling charge. We had hoped that the suppliers would not be quite as efficient with shipping as they proved to be, so that we would have time to stop in Mauritius on the way, but within days of ordering we were advised that they were to be despatched immediately. As some places will only hold things for a short time we thought we should be in La Réunion to receive them. But our passage was not without difficulty...

We left Port Mathurin on a lovely day, ideal to begin a passage if a little slow, but with a forecast for stronger winds. Through our first night they picked up to 15–20 knots, and continued through the following day giving us a good speed. As our third day was dawning, Mauritius was to the north of us, under heavy cloud. We hardly saw the island, which was eventually obliterated by heavy rain. The increase in swell was very noticeable, so things were not so comfortable, but we were still making excellent progress. With a consistent speed of over 6 knots under reefed main and small jib, we were sorting ourselves from having completed our routine night watches when there was an almighty BANG! from behind me in the cockpit. Clearly something a bit serious ... not our automatic-steering system, I pleaded mentally, which guides *Ironhorse* 24/7 and allows us to get on more easily with navigation, meal preparation and the like.

Whatever it was, it promptly sent the autopilot, guiding the Aries, into a 'refusal', in response to which I grabbed the tiller myself – just as Alfred (hardly awake yet) shot into the cockpit having felt that alarming sound through the hull. I pointed to where it seemed to have come from. When we looked over the stern the Aries paddle, having sheared off completely, was dangling behind, tethered by the line which attaches it to its frame and being dragged through the powerful ocean waves! My nightmare was now reality. Alfred donned his lifejacket and, boat hook in hand, climbed out over the

* 'Hard yakka' is an Australian expression meaning 'hard work'.

** This permits owners of cruising yachts to have spare parts shipped in free of import taxes because they will be re-exported with the yacht.

stern to try to rescue the paddle, me in a panic as to the wisdom of this in such rough conditions. It proved an impossible task, and even though we carry a spare paddle, replacing the broken one in these conditions was just not on and would have to wait until we were much steadier.

We looked at each other, Alfred reading my thoughts and commenting that at least we had not lost our main rudder, as had happened to good friends only a few weeks previously. They had had to abandon their yacht when, 1000 miles from both Cocos Keeling and Rodrigues, their rudder broke off in heavy seas. Luckily for them another yacht, also bound for Rodrigues, was only a day or so from where they were and, with the yachtie's network informing them of this dilemma, deviated to take them on board. Although we were not in their situation, we have never needed to steer *Ironhorse* by hand for any length of time. It would be quite demanding. There is 18 tons of her to control with a tiller – no wheel-steering, with all the gearing it provides. Alfred looked devastated – a rare happening. We were now west of Mauritius. Port Louis, the main port on the northwest coast, over 45 miles northeast of us, was the nearest place we could make for, and we debated the wisdom of doing so.

I checked the instruments. We had about 102 miles to go for the waypoint on the north coast of La Réunion, with the marina 10 miles beyond. Impossible to steer all that way, I thought – we were already experiencing how demanding it would be, and for such a distance it would require extraordinary effort and impossible tenacity. But if we pressed on, by the time we'd sailed another 45 miles – the distance to Port Louis – we'd have covered almost half the remaining distance to La Réunion, where our packages were to be delivered. The question was, of course, for how long could we steer her bulk in these increasingly heavy seas?

Alfred was on the tiller while we considered our options. "Can you take her again for a few minutes?" he asked. I did so, and he jumped down into the boat, fiddled about in the bosun's bag and returned to the cockpit with some short lengths of line and a couple of pulleys. "Just let's see if we (*et moi?!*) can set something up," he continued, threading rope through a pulley and passing it behind me, which I couldn't follow since my job required full concentration. I was already worried as to how much longer I could hold her steady, for we now had 22 knots of wind and the swell was noticeably bigger. But he continued to work around me, passing a line behind my arm then winding it around the tiller as I steered, before fixing something on the side deck. Another knot being tied, after a 'by eye' measurement of length and ... "Okay, let's see how this might work. It should make the steering lighter and I'm just wondering if it's possible for us to cope – between us – the rest of the way".

He sat beside the tiller – which was now wearing this contraption of lashings and blocks – and picked up the loose end of the rope coiled around it and led through pulleys fixed across the side-deck. He pulled it towards him, moving the tiller apparently more easily, then releasing it to move it the other way. "Have a go and tell me what you think".

I took the rope and sat where he'd been, then pulled and released. It certainly was much easier although it still needed some effort, especially when working against the weather side, and my poor little arthritic finger joints clearly didn't like it! The rope was already rubbing my skin and I imagined how it might be after a few hours – at the speed we were making in these stronger winds, and having computed that we had at



**Alfred
concentrating
as he works the pulley
system for easier tiller-steering**

least another 22 hours to reach the waypoint. “I’d better find our gloves,” I said, trying to work out the easiest way of keeping on track, and mentally reasoning ... should I watch the GPS digits, reading the bearing that I *should* be on and also telling me the bearing I was *actually* on? Or would it be easier looking at the ship’s compass, set nearer to where I was than the GPS? I tried both and rapidly realised that, whichever I chose, it was mesmerising and I could look nowhere else without going way off course. How long could I stick with it without going cross-eyed?

“Go and make us a cup of tea,” said Alfred – well, we’re Brits, for goodness sake! – “and let me try again”. After another few minutes he reckoned he could do two hours at a time. I questioned that, passing him his cuppa and offering gloves, both of us immediately realising that it was impossible to hold a cup or anything else and steer as well. So I took a turn whilst he donned the gloves and drank his tea, then he took over and I had mine ... by which time it was very obvious that our normal routine would have to be abandoned if we were to maintain *Ironhorse*’s progress. We considered heaving-to from time to time – perhaps to eat or sleep – but decided we should aim to continue non-stop if it was physically possible, agreeing to get drinks and snacks during our breaks. The test began.

While Alfred steered I prepared some food in a covered pan on top of the cooker so that we could heat it and ‘pick’ when we weren’t steering. (Interestingly, neither of us felt hungry with all this tension and most of the food remained untouched). Then, by the time I’d been to the heads, I realised my ‘free’ hour was almost up and went to relieve Alfred. “I’m fine”, he declared. “I’ll call you if necessary”. So I went to lie on our pilot berth in an attempt to get all the rest I could. Half an hour later, he called. “Two hours is too much”, he admitted. So I prepared to take my turn, with us both

agreeing that one hour was sufficient – not so much because of the physical demands of working the pulleys as because concentrating to keep on course was so very wearing.

By now we had both tried the two options – digital GPS, and old fashioned ship's compass. Alfred had also tried using our heading line on the chart plotter screen and considered that, although not easy, it was definitely the most user-friendly. And after a few minutes I had to agree. It wasn't easy, but because the graphics showed our heading line superimposed over the course to the waypoint we could respond more promptly by trying to keep them together.

Our cockpit is relatively dry, with detachable side panels, only the one to weather normally in place while on passage. It does a remarkable job of protecting us when a wave breaks over *Ironhorse* – which was happening quite often, with more than 20 knots of wind for much of the time. The Achilles heel of the system are the small gaps where they fit around the two winches on either side. Water gets through these and runs into the cockpit, at times with some force, depending on the wind and wave strength.

No problem for us normally, unless we're daft enough to forget and sit on that side, but our new steering arrangement *required* that we sit on the weather side so, inevitably, we each got cold showers from time to time. Alfred was the first to experience it – he cried out and laughed, then grimaced as he was hit by that cold onslaught, and wished he'd been wearing waterproofs over his 'warmish' clothing, now soaked from behind. (We'd left hot and humid Malaysia, less than 7°N of the equator, only three months previously, and hadn't really had time to toughen up to the cooler temperatures of 19°S!) I'm a real coward when it comes to cold water and rushed to seek out our brand new ocean-going Mustos, which were to experience their ocean baptism within minutes of my beginning my turn.

The suits were a tad too much because we didn't need such warm stuff – only protection from those intermittent dousings. We were actually working quite hard and continuously for the hour, so sweated a lot, even though we left the Mustos undone. But since our lightweight suits were packed deep in a locker we had to put up with it. The suits were certainly doing a good job – especially as the drenchings became cooler as the night progressed.

We steered for an hour, then rested for an hour. Interestingly, both seemed to race by. The concentration of steering occupied us full time, with no lull or boredom, and our rest time – such a luxury – seemed to pass incredibly quickly. And of course the one off duty had to deal with any other issue – like checking the radar or calculating the CPA of nearby shipping with the AIS*.

Our sailing gloves are tipless and I'd swapped mine for full-finger gloves because at times the line rubbed my bare fingertips, which threatened blisters. However, their lining rubbed against the outside leather as I worked, and consequently also rubbed my fingers! We both tried different gloves until we were comfortable.

After having managed several stints, with my fingers feeling sore and my right shoulder aching, I found myself wondering if I could last the course. We had covered less than half the distance, and I wondered if I should suggest heaving-to so we could have a proper rest. But Alfred's encouragement and enthusiasm kept me from that, and I continued with gritted teeth, determined not to let the side down. No messing about

* CPA: Closest Point of Approach; AIS: Automatic Identification System.

during my break, as I tend to do when relieved from a night watch, believing it helps me wind down – I'd remove my oilies and throw myself onto the pilot berth to refresh myself as much as possible. "Try to get some sleep," Alfred would say each time. (What, in one hour? It was no time at all!) A longer break each time would have been wonderful, but the need to relieve Alfred forced me to drag myself out with enough time within that precious hour to get my togs on. (How complicated they can be when you're in a hurry!) Then I'd give my fingers a rub, get the gloves on, take a deep breath and take over.

By now we were well into the night, not having slept at all since the previous night, and part of the steering rope was beginning to show signs of chafing – we know the signs well on a gaffer! I worried that the line would need replacing but it kept good. To keep alert from the mesmerising power of the screen, every so often I'd give myself a 'break' and treat myself to a quick glance elsewhere, usually at the SOG* display racing through its split-second computations. Unbelievable – 7.5 knots ... 7.9 ... 8.2 ... 8.5 ... 7.6 ... must watch our course! No wonder I needed more effort to hold her.

This presented another question for me to ponder: which would be preferable – to have less wind and be able to steer more easily, which would take longer, or have to work harder in stronger winds, but arrive sooner? Yes, the winds had increased and *Ironhorse's* solid rails on the leeward side were now being dragged through the water as we raced along. No wonder we needed our oilies. It was just as well I had the distraction of steering.

* SOG: Speed Over Ground



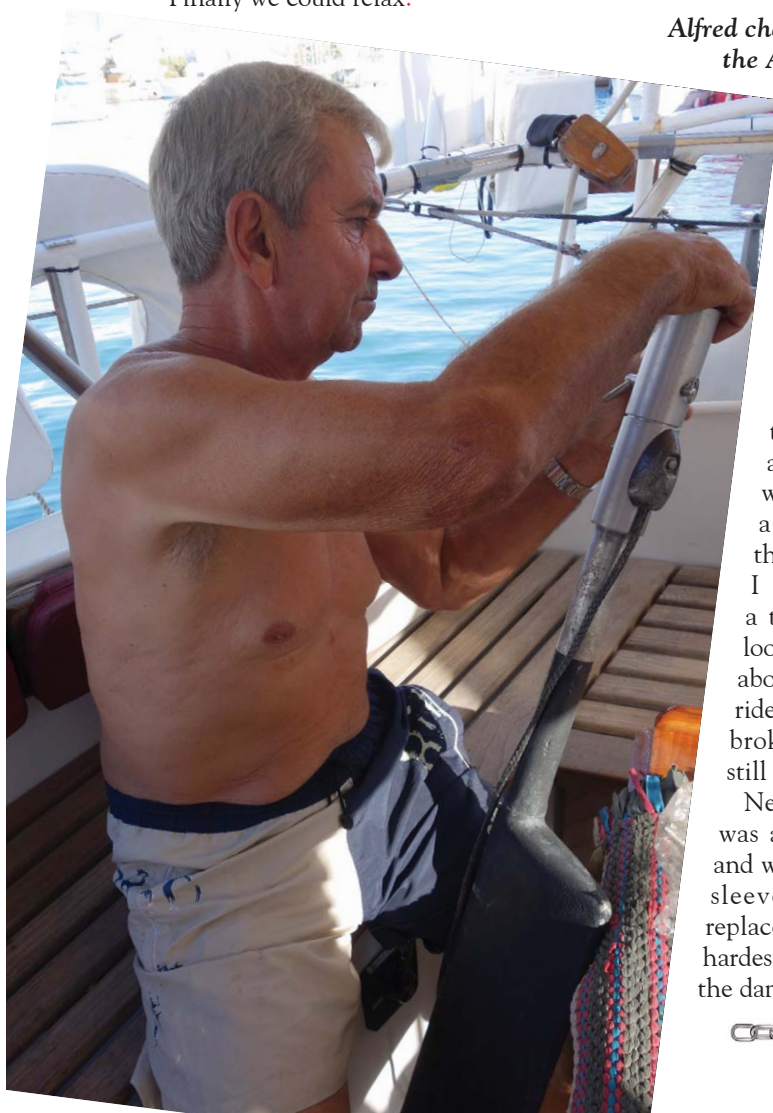
The sheared Aries paddle on Ironhorse's coachroof, showing both halves of the broken sleeve

By midnight we were only 20 miles from our waypoint, with the bright lights of La Réunion's north coast clearly visible ahead. It was obvious that we would be way ahead of our planned dawn arrival. But what encouragement, and what a boost to determination – less than three more hours of hard yakka! And if we needed to heave-to for a few hours to await daylight, that would be more than welcome!

The wind remained just aft of the beam for most of the time and, as we continued along the north coast, our concern was how long it would take to find some lee so that we could comfortably get to the foredeck to drop the hanked-on headsails and reduce our speed. It was not until we were within a few miles of the northwest tip of the island with its brightly lit town slopes that we felt some protection from the land, and we were able to slow down. Then, having pulled the main in amidships, *Ironhorse* slowed almost to a stop, comfortably bobbing slowly back and forth in a semicircle.

Finally we could relax.

*Alfred checking the new sleeve,
the Aries ready to go again*



“We’ve made it!” breathed Alfred. “I’m really proud of you”, he added, hugging me as we both collapsed onto the cockpit seat, delighted that our 70 year old bodies were still up to it. As he went on to mention something about “... repairs later” we both became aware of a bump-bumping around the stern. “What now?” I thought, as he took a torch to check. “Hey, look!” he exclaimed, “how about this?” After a rough ride of over 100 miles, our broken Aries paddle was still attached!

Needless to say the repair was attended to promptly, and within a few days a new sleeve had been made to replace the broken one, the hardest part being removal of the damaged pieces.

